DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 411 104 RC 020 788

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TITLE Conditions, Attitudes and Concerns in Rural Education: An Examination of the Appalachian Counties of North Carolina.

PUB DATE 1996-10-13

NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Rural Education Association (San Antonio, TX, October 1996).

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.

DESCRIPTORS *College Students; Education Majors; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Quality of Life; Rural Areas; Rural Education; Rural Urban Differences; *Rural Youth; *School Attitudes; *Stereotypes; *Student Attitudes

IDENTIFIERS Appalachia; *North Carolina (West); *Western Carolina University NC

ABSTRACT

This paper examines rural conditions from three perspectives: education, demographics, and economics from national, state and regional data sources; Rural Attitude Survey data from students at Western Carolina University in the Appalachian mountain region; and concerns of teachers about education in the region derived from focus group discussions. A brief review points out that North Carolina's rural population is decreasing and growing older, has a lower median income than the urban population, and has higher proportions of poverty and the working poor. Nationally, the gap in high school completion rates between rural and urban populations has narrowed but the gap in college completion rates has increased. Western North Carolina is deficient in the areas of quality child care, adult functional literacy, college completion rates, and implementation of new technologies. Definitions of rural are ambiguous and ambivalent and characterized by negative images. Negative attitudes and stereotypes about rural people and Appalachians are prevalent and affect student self-concept. Nevertheless, a survey of 155 students in education classes at Western Carolina University revealed overwhelmingly positive feelings for rural areas and their home communities, a strong sense of community and connection, and positive attitudes toward the university and its surroundings. The responsibility of a rural university to its region's rural communities is discussed. (SV)

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Conditions, Attitudes and Concerns in Rural Education:

An Examination of the Appalachian Counties of North Carolina

National Rural Education Association

San Antonio, Texas

October 13, 1996

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This presentation examines rural conditions from three perspectives:

- Education, demographics, and economics from national, state and regional data sources
- Rural Attitude Survey data from students at Western Carolina University, in the Appalachian mountain region, and
- Concerns of teachers about education in the region derived from focus group discussions

The aim of this examination is to develop some solutions to educational problems and issues in the Appalachian mountains (or at least to examine the possible solutions), and I address the role of the rural, regional university in helping develop a cultural consciousness and developing a research base to try to do so. The local focus of this study is the western mountain counties of North Carolina (about 11 counties - not including Buncombe and Henderson.)

Demographic

Three population trends (Herzog & Pittman, 1995)

- rural pop decreasing
- proportionally, there are more working aged adults in rural than in metropolitan areas
- older segment of the population has increased more in rural areas

The local counties actually buck the trend toward decreasing population with small increases. However, when compared with urban counties in the state (Wake, Mecklenburg, etc.,) the difference is huge. EG., Jackson County has a 2% increase -- Meck has a 15% increase.) A demographic report by Harold Hodgkinson (1993) compares the condition of the state of North Carolina with its rural areas. Although his examination is based on the entire state and not just the mountain counties, what he stated seems to echo the figures both nationally and in the region:

Despite all this development in the cities, North Carolina's rural people live just about as they did in 1980. Unfortunately, the issues of the rural disadvantaged in North Carolina are not politically appealing. Few political advantages result from dealing with the problems of rural poor people who probably will not vote, are hard to organize, and certainly cannot contribute to a political war chest. This may explain why, during the 1980s, the state progressed so far in economic development, yet did not make comparable progress in human development. (p. 44)

Economic

- Median family income about 3/4 that in metro areas
- Metro areas have a proportionately greater share of professional and upper-level managerial positions; jobs pay more -- thus heightening the income differentials between rural and metro areas
- Rural areas have a higher proportion of the working poor in low-wage, low-benefit jobs
- Poverty more prevalent in rural areas. The % of people in poverty in the North Carolina mountain counties ranges from 12 1/2 to 25.
- More than one third of the rural Americans who are in poverty are children. The % of children in poverty in WNC is around 22%.

Educational

- High school and College completion rates (national)
- Gap in HS completion rates between rural and metro has been reduced
- Gap in College completion rates has increased (3.4% -1960; 9.5% - 1990)
- Outmigration explains some of the difference (Brain drain).
- Rural schools smaller and poorer than non rural schools

In the local region,

- **Consolidation** to equalize opportunities has not been the panacea that was hoped for - rural students have fewer advanced or specialized courses. (Languages, math , sciences, computer courses, Advanced Placement courses, and fewer student participants in such courses continue to make their viability questionable, etc.)
- **Child care** - Lack of good quality child care; one teacher developed a pre-school literacy development program called "Ready to Learn". Her community had no child care centers.
- **Functional Illiteracy** - About 20 % of persons 25 years and over who have not finished 9th grade. Teachers find great deficiencies in reading and writing abilities of their students, including honors students.
- **Educational Attainment** - Baccalaureate degree held by those 25 and over is around 10% (not counting Jackson County, home of a comprehensive university which has about double that percentage of baccalaureate degree holders.)
- **Lagging in technology.** The status of technology in the region ranges from nothing to classroom and computer labs to almost ready to get wired for the information highway.

The Appalachian mountain counties of North Carolina (with two exceptions, Buncombe and Henderson) are more economically, demographically, and educationally depressed than the nation and the state as a whole. The teachers I interviewed for this study live and work in very rural communities characterized by high rates of functional illiteracy and unemployment and low rates of educational attainment. The teachers' expressed concerns about the overwhelming problems within the educational system and the problems they saw through their work with children on a daily basis. Elementary teachers were concerned about child care issues, including parental literacy. High school teachers were concerned that their schools did not offer enough challenging courses to

allow their students to compete in the state or national marketplace, for example, in college admission.

In contrast, the student responses to the Rural Attitude Survey were characterized by idealism and optimism. They considered country life bountiful and beautiful, not unlike much of the literature on the virtues of country living. The view of country life held by individuals depends on their circumstances and experiences. Students in their college days are more than likely somewhat free of the concerns of teachers.

Definition of rural - ambiguity and ambivalence

Conversations about rural areas and issues invariably lead to the question, well what do you mean by rural? Many concepts that are understood in popular culture are difficult to precisely define, and 'rural' appears to suffer from that ambiguity. Academics writing about rural education have recently addressed the definition problem. What is rural? asked the Rural Education News (Morton, 1994). "Few issues bedevil analysts and planners concerned with rural education more than the question of what actually constitutes 'rural,'" claimed Joyce Stern in a comprehensive federal report (Stern, 1994, p. 4). Its meaning varies depending on the perspective of the individual doing the defining. Certainly, ruralness in western Montana is not the same as it is in western North Carolina or North Georgia. In this paper I'm going to report on the ways in which rural Appalachian college students define and experience rural life and the ways in which their attitudes compare to general attitudes toward ruralness. Let's first consider the definition of rural from objective sources.

Objective Definitions of Rural

Some of the ambiguity and ambivalence related to ruralness is caused by negative images and attitudes. An examination of definitions finds 'rural' defined from an urban, negative perspective. The US. government's term for a rural area is *non metropolitan,* implying an area without skyscrapers and interstate junctions. The Census Bureau defines rural areas as communities with *fewer than* 2,500 inhabitants or *fewer than* 1000

inhabitants per square mile. New York City, Los Angeles and Chicago are not normally conceived of as "non rural areas with more than 2,500 people" or as "areas without barns." (Herzog & Pittman, 1995).

The word "country' is often used synonomously with 'rural,' and while it connotes the positive images of pastoral, idyllic, and serene, it also leads to the notion of 'countrified' and its negative connotations of crude, unpolished, awkward and loutish. In contrast, urbanites are referred to as civic, civil and cultured. Even textbooks used in rural Appalachia contribute to the negative connotations of Appalachian ruralness. **EG.,** Students are required to study North Carolina history in both 7th and 8th grade. The 8th grade text most commonly used throughout the state describes the western, mountainous Appalachian region of NC as 'unproductive.'

Negative Attitudes

Rural is often defined in stereotypical terms, and in the enlightened 1990s, it is ironic to note that people in rural areas, including rural Appalachia, are still fair game for public ridicule. A sports columnist in the Asheville Citizen-Times recently ridiculed WCU in a column entitled, "Country comes to the big city," He referred to WCU as the country-bumpkins who beat "high-brow Davidson ... in the championship game of the Southern Conference Tournament..." His characterization of WCU and its coach illustrates a contemptuous attitude and acceptance of ridicule toward the rural Appalachian culture.

I would be remiss not to mention that the newspaper was flooded with angry responses, some of which addressed the inherent cultural bias reflected in the column. Gloria Houston, a noted author of young readers, wrote that she was "...enraged." She said, "I am constantly faced with the negative stereotypes of the "ignorant hillbilly" so prevalent throughout the world." and she was "particularly incensed that a fellow writer, writing for an audience of natives and current residents, would perpetuate a degrading

stereotype typical of the ignorance of those who write about the culture with little or no knowledge of it."

I was teaching a unit on multicultural education at the time this flap occurred, and unaware of it, I asked my students, "how does prejudice develop, and what do we mean by stereotypes?" There was an outcry from the class, "It's what the Asheville Citizen is doing to us!" I couldn't have planned a better lesson. It helped the students link discrimination against Blacks, Native American Indians and Appalachians. It helped them understand prejudices and stereotypes first hand.

Negative stereotypes and self-concept

The pervasiveness of the negative attitudes toward rural Appalachia is often reflected in comments made by our students who apologize for being from rural Appalachia. Jack, a student at Western Carolina University, described these feelings in a note he wrote last semester. Among other things, he said, **(OV)**

> I am very proud of my heritage but I have found out over my 5 yrs at NCSU and WCU that if they found you are country they think you are inbred and stupid and like all them "you are a redneck" jokes. A prime example of this came last year when I was admitted to the education program but with red flags because someone during my interview said I talked with a country slang. I did not think this was a problem but to talk to the people in the education department I had the IQ of a rock. They were -- like -- someone in my family could help me with this problem. I thought they were going to tell me to go to something like AA except for country-talking people. They made me feel like Forest Gump, and I really did not like it. I could understand the education department's concern if my plan was to teach at a city or Northern school but I plan on teaching at a country school in western North Carolina where most of the students talk with a country slang like myself.

When Appalachian teacher education students discussed their goals and aspirations, they often indicated that going to college meant going against their family's wishes. They talked about the pressures from home not to go to college. As one student said, "My family could not understand why I would want to go to college. None of them ever went to college and they got along just fine without it. They really pressured me not to go." And, although she has a prestigious $20,000 North Carolina Teaching Fellows scholarship, she has been a rather ambivalent student herself, not making the grades she could.

The Rural Attitude Survey

The negative experiences and attitudes of so many stand in stark contrast, however, to the pride rural Appalachian students expressed when asked about living in their rural communities. I gave a rural attitude survey to 155 students in 5 different classes in the College of Education & Psychology at Western Carolina University. The point of the survey was to examine students' attitudes toward their rural homes, communities and education.

(OV) This was not a random sample. The students at WCU chose to attend a university in a rural area either actively or by default. It may be that students who grew up in the same areas but went away to urban colleges have starkly different attitudes. We would be most interested in assessing the attitudes of the top high school students who leave the region to attend college. About 80% of the respondents were from rural/small town areas; about 20% of the respondents were from urban/suburban areas. Sixty - six percent (66%) of the respondents planned to enter the field of education. About half of the respondents planned to return to their communities after college; 83% of those planned to enter the field of education.

What is Rural? ***Where I was born, where I was raised and where I will die.***

The student responses to the survey were overwhelmingly positive and reflective of the values often described in the literature. EG., A fond identification with a certain

place, close ties with people, a shared history of experiences and values -- these are elements commonly associated with the southern Appalachians (Beaver, 1986). Only 7% of the respondents used negative terms in their replies. I will summarize the results of **three of the open-ended questions** from the survey.

Question 1. What do you think of when you hear the word rural?

In contrast to the definitions discussed previously and the pervasive negative attitudes, the students used rich images that conveyed positive experiences with rural living. Their answers attest to a love for their rural heritage, homes and communities despite their awareness of the stereotypes. Student responses to this question described rural in terms of people, a sense of community, businesses, country, smallness of scale, nature, houses, farms, crops, roads, family, safety, pastimes, religion and schools. Their answers reflected an idyllic version of rural living, such as is illustrated by these responses. **(OV)**

- *Small, out of the way, nothing fancy. Everybody knows everybody. Like one big family;*
- *Children in the fields playing cow pasture football*
- *Good people, great friends, hardworking people, good country folks talking*
- *Simple lives. Only the basics are important..*

Many of the students' responses reflected aspects of place, such as,

- *Rural to me is my hometown school.*
- *Small businesses, one gas station.*
- *Open land, two lane streets, country roads.*
- *People actively involved in community activities .*
- *A high school everybody is proud of.*

The students mentioned the importance of a sense of community with responses such as: involvement; small, peaceful community; a community that couldn't survive very long without help from other places. When they mentioned qualities related to

business and industry, they used descriptions that implied manageable sized communities: *one post office; no factories or shopping areas; convenience stores; small stores where the owners know each of the customers and each person feels welcome.* When they described people, they mentioned characteristics that evoked a sense of connection; for example, *people who care about each other instead of the amount of money they make.*

Question 2. Like their responses to the first question, the students' answers to the second question, **"What feelings does the word 'rural' bring out in you?"** were overwhelmingly positive. The most common answers given were: closeness, comfortable, family, friendly, home, peaceful, safe, and warmth. Samples of students' replies: **(OV)**

- *Calmness, feel more like my true self, enjoyment, love, peace.*
- *The feeling of security, family ties, and lots of beautiful scenery.*
- *This word brings out a feeling of being at home. I grew up in a rural place and the word bring memories to the surface.*
- *Belonging, being a part of something special*
- *I feel gratitude to God for places like that.*
- *Rural gives me the same feeling as when I think of home.*

Negative Responses from Students

The negative comments that students made on the surveys composed a very small percentage of the responses, but in the interest of providing a fair presentation, we will include samples. From 14 of the surveys (some were mixed positive and negative), 10 indicated all negative responses to #1 and #2. Of the 10, 3 were from rural areas, 1 from a small town, and 6 from city or suburban areas. The images given by these students were typical of the negative attitudes that were discussed previously. Students referred to rural areas as backwards, conservative, places where there was not a lot to do, poor, and remote. In some cases, students indicated that they had positive experiences and feelings

about rural areas, but they thought others judged their rural homes negatively; for example, one student responded that, *people think of my town as a hick town.* Their descriptions included the following qualities: **(2 OVs)**

- *Boring, boredom, discriminating feelings toward people from rural communities*
- *Don't want to be there, don't like rural areas, wouldn't want to live there*
- *Isolated, Just space*
- *People who don't experience much in life*
- *Naive, narrow-mindedness, near the end of the earth, negative, no culture, nothing around*
- *Poverty, Stifled, Very limited opportunities*
- *Country music*

Question 3: Describe WCU and its surroundings as if you are telling an old friend about it. Those with the negative reactions to rural areas described the university with terms reflective of negative attitudes toward its ruralness. In other words, they focused on the rural nature of WCU. For example:

"The closest town is a back hills, redneck town that doesn't like people who aren't locals. The only thing surrounding the campus is mountains." From Vienna, VA described as medium large suburb.

"They call it Cullowhat because you don't know where in the world you are stuck here in these mountains. All of the people here are from the hills and intend to stay in these hills." From Raleigh, NC.

Positive evaluation of WCU and its surroundings

The 10 students who expressed negative feelings about rural areas and felt that WCU was isolated and too rural were a small fraction of the entire group surveyed. Most of the respondents had positive feelings about WCU and its surroundings, just as they did about general ideas of ruralness. They liked the beautiful mountains, the small size,

quiet, safety, and peace. The people were referred to as friendly, caring and helpful. Several students mentioned the need to join fraternities and sororities to have something to do, while others found activity in outdoor recreation such as hiking, camping, canoeing, and rafting. Some examples illustrate varying perspectives about WCU:

- *WCU is large. I've gotten lost several times. I feel this area is very fortunate to have a four year degree university.*
- *Here I feel like a person rather than a number.*
- *WCU has nothing. It is not somewhere to go if you are used to walking a block to the mall, the bank, or Wendy's. It is beautiful, surrounded by the mountains, a river and wonderful people.*
- *WCU is small and warm. It is really nice to go to because you don't feel lost.*

Although this is a study in progress, and we are continuing to refine our survey and collect more data, I think we can draw some tentative conclusions.

1. The conditions in rural areas need improvement.
2. The neglect of rural areas and the negative attitudes and stereotypes are related.
3. The students in our survey sample expressed a passion for their rural homes and communities -- in spite of the negative conditions and attitudes with which they are continually bombarded.
4. Rural universities, such as WCU, have a responsibility to the region and the individuals in the region. First, university faculty should learn about the cultures and communities from which they draw. To some degree, education programs should be tailored to the region -- this can be done in service, research and teaching. Generic university programs miss the opportunities to build on the strengths of rural communities. University faculty can systematically attack educational problems through practical, collaborative research with graduate students who are teaching. For example I am working with two teachers on projects in their communities. One is a child care program in a community which had no center before she started hers. The other is a project

designed to improve AP opportunities for students by forming a consortium of four counties so they can share resourses.

We must learn how to value our students' culture and, at the same time, help them overcome problems in basic skills such as writing, reading and subject knowledge. Teacher education students, particularly, can then take those skills and values back to their own classrooms, passing on traditions and helping their own students develop an appreciation for their culture and heritage. Perhaps more students will return to their rural communities, gradually helping the conditions in those communities to improve. Perhaps this will contribute to fewer qualifications and apologies when students express pride in their rural homes, schools and communities.

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